

— Essential —

ELEMENTS

— of Youth Ministry —

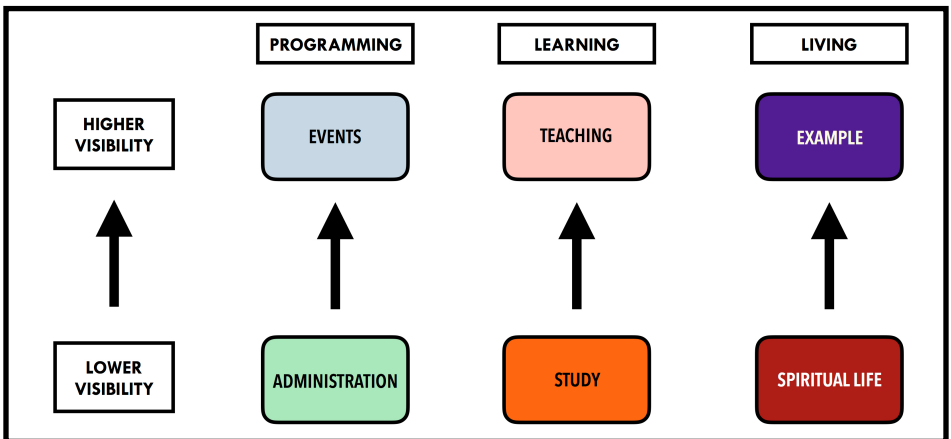
—LUKE DOCKERY—



Introduction

I have been doing a lot of reflection on the practice of youth ministry recently, which I guess is not too surprising since I am, well, a youth minister. The more I think about it, I am convinced that there are six necessary elements of effective youth ministry. I am not absolutely claiming that this is an exhaustive list, but I do think that the categories I talk about below, properly defined, basically incorporate the whole practice of what youth ministry should be.

I should also point out that these elements are not dependent on a particular *model* of youth ministry; rather, they are characteristics that *should be* a part of *any* model. Not to overcomplicate things, these six elements basically fall into three categories, with each category containing two elements: one more visible element, which is supported by a related, less visible element (see chart below).



Events (High-Visibility Programming)

The category of **programming** refers to a lot of the stuff that I think people most naturally think of when they think of youth ministry—trips, special events, and regular activities that the youth group is involved in—and the behind-the-scenes planning that makes all of this activity possible.

Simply put, although youth ministry is about a lot more than **events** on a calendar, events are a fundamental and crucial part of youth ministry. Those events can be widely varied (devotionals, youth rallies, summer camps, ski trips, service projects, flag football games, eating together, game nights, etc.) and can accomplish a range of objectives (fellowship, study, service, outreach, etc.), but ultimately, if you never have events for your young people, you don't really have a youth ministry.

Events represent what is most likely the most public aspect of youth ministry, and many times, people may judge a youth ministry's effectiveness solely on the basis of the quality or perceived quality of your events.



Administration (Low-Visibility Programming)

In order for your events to actually *happen*, it requires a great deal of planning, and this is where **administration** comes in. This is much less visible than the events themselves, but it's absolutely crucial: if you don't invest time in administrative duties, then your youth ministry simply will be unable to function.

Youth ministry administration is about much more than putting together a calendar of events, however. It involves all sorts of planning and record-keeping that enable your programming to actually be implemented: recruiting chaperones and volunteers, organizing curriculum, tracking youth attendance, setting up group texts, sending out parent newsletters, and the list goes on and on.

I have found that administration can be a difficult thing for youth ministers: because most administrative tasks go on behind the scenes, no one (generally) forces you to do them, and to be honest, usually they are not very enjoyable. And I do think it is possible for a youth ministry with poor administration to still have effective programming at times, but I think good administration makes consistency in quality programming much more likely, and also helps to make a youth ministry much more sustainable.

Teaching (High-Visibility Learning)

Any effective youth ministry will make it a priority to provide an environment where **learning** can occur, since we want our young people to grow up to be mature people of faith. Primarily, we want our young people to learn about God and the Bible, but it is important for them to learn other things as well (Luke 2:52 talks about how the 12-year Jesus grew physically, intellectually, socially, and spiritually, and in my opinion, this sort of well-rounded growth serves as a good model for what we should try to achieve in youth ministry).

Most visibly, this characteristic of youth ministry is achieved through the practice of **teaching**. Teaching occurs in formal settings, like Bible classes, sermons, devotionals, worship-leading programs, and youth group retreats, and it also occurs more informally, in mentoring relationships and personal Bible studies.

Because a lot of people can witness you teach (including adults in some settings), this is another element where people tend to make judgments about the quality of the youth minister.



Study (Low-Visibility Learning)

The reality is that your teaching will not be very good for very long if you have not invested a significant amount of time in **study**. Or to put it another way, before students can learn, the youth minister has to.

I think study is very important, and maybe because I am somewhat of a nerd, I actually enjoy it. But really, I feel that there is an almost endless list of sources and topics that are worth studying which help you to teach more effectively as a youth minister:

- Scripture (obviously)
- Interpretation and exegesis of Scripture
- Theology
- Ministry (general)
- Youth ministry (both theory and practice)
- Adolescent development
- Interpersonal Relationships and Conflict
- Leadership
- Church History
- Technology and Social Media
- Teaching Methods and Theory

This list barely scratches the surface of different areas of study which apply directly to youth ministry, and help you to teach more effectively.

Study is another low-visibility element, and for many people, studying is not fun, and because of that, it's an element that can be crowded out of a busy schedule. Still, I do think it's true that people can tell by your teaching if you have done your homework or not and put in the necessary amount of study ahead of time. And more importantly, if you provide a full slate of exciting and well-run events, but your students never really learn anything, what have you really accomplished?

Example (High-Visibility Living)

Intentionally, I have saved the category of **living** for last, because I think it is the most important: fundamentally, Christianity is more than a bunch of activities we do,



or a bunch of precepts we learn: it is a way of life. And effective youth ministries should help prepare young people to live according to the Way of Jesus.

Most visibly, this is done in the **example** of the youth minister himself. It is really hard to overstate the importance of your own personal example and the influence it has as you interact with your students on a day-to-day basis and seek to build meaningful relationships with them. If you provide great events and wonderful, biblical teaching, but act in such a way that does not reflect Christ, you send a mixed message to your students, and may even drive them away from the faith. Your students witness your devotion to the church, the way you interact with your spouse, the way you respond when another student misbehaves, and whether or not you cheat at dodgeball. And based on what they see, they make judgments about the authenticity of your discipleship (and honestly, they should, shouldn't they?).

Obviously youth ministers are never perfect, but we should live lives of devotion to Jesus and moral excellence so that we can appropriate the words of Paul to our students: "Imitate me as I imitate Christ."

Spiritual Life (Low-Visibility Living)

The ability to be a good spiritual example for young people does not occur in a vacuum; it is undergirded by a robust **spiritual life** characterized by devotion to Christ and attention to spiritual disciplines. Ultimately, while good organizational skills and study habits are an important part of youth ministry, the single most important element is a devotion to Jesus Christ and a desire to help others develop a similar devotion.

Personal spiritual formation is enhanced by disciplines such as prayer, Bible reading, fasting, etc., is empowered by the Holy Spirit, and is the fuel that empowers us for ministry, and keeps us going when circumstances are difficult and our ministries are not achieving the results we would like.



Conclusion

If you work in youth ministry (whether that is your job, or whether you support a youth ministry as a deacon, parent, chaperone, teacher, volunteer, or whatever), and *especially* if you are new in youth ministry, I hope that this list of the elements of youth ministry and the way they are related is helpful to you. Youth ministry is a multi-faceted endeavor, and I don't know many people who naturally excel at all areas of it (I know I don't!). That being said, being aware of the different elements of youth ministry helps us to take stock of how we are doing in the different areas, and enables us to focus more on those areas that are more of a struggle for us.